



from research to reality

## BRIEF

RESEARCH  
DEVELOPMENT  
&  
TECHNOLOGY  
TRANSFER

# Safety Impacts of Driver License Revocation Systems

The Wisconsin Department of Transportation is responsible for licensing drivers to operate vehicles on the state's roads and highways. WisDOT's Division of Motor Vehicles administers several laws designed to identify unsafe drivers and withdraw their operating privileges so they will no longer endanger others. Through DMV's efforts more than 300,000 unsafe drivers in Wisconsin have their operating privileges taken away every year.

## What's the Problem?

There is a growing concern on the part of WisDOT and others charged with ensuring safe roads and highways—such as those in law enforcement, the courts and the legislature—that Wisconsin's existing system is too complex, not well understood and difficult to administer fairly. Three distinct listings of traffic violations are currently used by DMV for restricting or taking away operating privileges:

- The point system, established in 1956. Drivers who receive 12 demerit points—in one year—lose their operating privileges. Various numbers of points are given upon conviction for any of more than 30 different types of moving violations, such as speeding, operating under the influence of intoxicants or drugs, failure to yield right of way and illegal passing.
- The habitual traffic offender (HTO) system, established in 1980. Drivers who are convicted—during any five-year period—of 12 moving traffic violations of any kind or of four major violations or of any combination of 12 major or minor convictions also lose their operating privileges.
- The graduated driver license (GDL) program, established in 2000. Designed to address the disproportionate number of deaths and injuries among young drivers and their passengers, this system first issues new drivers an instruction permit for six months, followed by a probationary license valid for two years from their next birthday. Points are doubled after the first traffic ticket for drivers holding either an instruction permit or a probationary license. Other restrictions limit the number of passengers and driving hours.

Other perceived problems with the current system: points cannot be assessed for out-of-state convictions and a significant number of people still drive after losing their operating privileges.

## Research Objectives

This project, with the following objectives, is thought to be the first comprehensive effort in the United States to assess administrative withdrawal systems:

1. Identify how well Wisconsin drivers understand the current system and consequent impact on highway safety.
2. Identify alternatives used by other states and related safety impacts.
3. Analyze options for restructuring Wisconsin's license withdrawal systems that would be better understood, more consistently applied and more likely to increase highway safety.
4. Assess the level of acceptance of various aspects of the current system by key groups.
5. Determine which alternative systems would permit consistent processing of out-of-state driver convictions in Wisconsin and of Wisconsin driver convictions occurring in other states.

## Research Methodology

Qualitative. The consultant performed a literature search, interviewed key DMV staff and other experts, conducted focus groups with both non-offenders and offenders (drivers whose licenses had been taken away), and worked closely with the project Technical Oversight Committee in the design of survey instruments. The committee consisted of people from DMV, the legislature, courts, law enforcement, prosecutors' offices and insurance companies. Detailed findings from these activities are compiled in a separate volume.

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The Wisconsin  
Department of  
Transportation

**“We hope to make our system more efficient and fairer—and improve safety on the highways. This research will help us do that.”**

- Jeffrey Knupp,  
WisDOT Motor Vehicle  
Program Specialist

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Impact on Highway  
Safety of Multiple  
Administrative  
Driver License  
Withdrawal  
Systems

**0092-01-08**

March 2002

Quantitative. The consultant carried out three surveys to determine the views of the following groups. Detailed findings are compiled in three separate volumes.

- Wisconsin residents—1,457 drivers
- DMV coordinators from other states—41 responses
- Key publics in Wisconsin (courts, law enforcement, legislators, attorneys, prosecutors, insurance)—22 responses

A Summary Report of the entire project includes key findings and common themes across the qualitative and quantitative research and executive summaries of each of the four reports.

## Research Results

This study provides an in-depth look at issues related to Wisconsin's current three systems for withdrawing driving privileges and outlines the systems of 41 other states, including the views of those who administer them. The views of key Wisconsin stakeholder groups were carefully documented and used to shape the survey phases of the research. The consultant draws a number of conclusions or generalizations, a few of which are highlighted below:

- Wisconsin's point system is poorly understood, possibly too complex and in need of increased educational efforts.
- Knowledge of the point system may not improve driver safety. Education efforts prior to suspension would be needed to assess the relationship between knowledge and prevention.
- Wisconsin's habitual traffic offender system is even less known and understood.
- Graduated driver license programs are becoming more numerous across the country. Awareness of Wisconsin's GDL program is low across the general public but higher for young drivers and their families. Support for the program is very high.
- Impact on insurance costs is the greatest concern for drivers. An important question is how costs can play a greater deterrent role.
- There is solid support for counting out-of-state violations for Wisconsin license withdrawal.
- There is solid support for mandated and progressive penalties for multiple offenders
- A high percentage of people (70%) drive after losing their license—a problem nationally as well as in Wisconsin.
- Attacking the problem of habitual traffic offenders may require multiple strategies, such as higher fines, taking away repeat offenders' cars or license plates, longer suspensions, jail time and counseling/education.
- Wisconsin's HTO system may be redundant and not cost-effective given the fact drivers slated to lose their operating privileges under the HTO system have already lost them through another type of withdrawal.

## Implementation

Based on this research the Technical Oversight Committee will consider specific recommendations for changes to Wisconsin's driver license withdrawal systems. Strong involvement of the key stakeholder groups represented by committee members will be required to make changes. A related WisDOT study (0092-02-10) on occupational (or hardship) licenses, scheduled for completion in October 2002, may provide additional input for the committee.

## Benefits of this Research

The detailed documentation of all phases of this research provides a wealth of information on which to base future decisions in Wisconsin, which will hopefully lead to safer highways. Findings can also serve as a baseline against which success of future strategies can be evaluated. The survey data on Wisconsin and 41 other states will be a valuable resource for others seeking to improve their driver licensing programs.



*Wisconsin State Patrol officers enforce driving laws.*

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